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SUBJECT: SLOVAK MFA WELCOMES PRESIDENT'S VWP ANNOUNCEMENT

REF: STATE 191878

Per REFTEL Ambassador briefed FM Kubis on the President's Visa Waiver Program Initiative. The MFA subsequently released the following statement.

BEGIN TEXT (Informal translation):

The Slovak Ministry of Foreign Affairs greatly appreciates and welcomes the initiative of the U.S. President George Bush to modify the visa waiver program which he announced during his visit to Estonia. A visa waiver program for citizens of the new EU member countries when traveling to the U.S. that meets security requirements should make traveling easier.

We perceive the visa duty as the only open problem in the bilateral relations with the U.S. This topic has been presented by Slovak representatives at every level: within the framework of bilateral negotiations in the EU as well as through Coalition Visa Equity. That's why we understand President Bush's statement from Tallinn as the result of many years of activity and we consider it as an accommodating step on the part of the U.S. towards the solution of this issue which burdens our bilateral relations in vain.

The Slovak Republic is ready to continue working in close cooperation with the American side to fulfill the security and technical conditions mandated by American law and worked out in the Visa Roadmap with the aim of participating in the visa waiver program. The terms for introduction of a biometric passport have been accepted and we are involved in meeting the terms for Schengen entry. We introduced measures for passport protection and reporting lost and stolen passports and the visa refusal rate has been gradually decreasing.

Visits by the Slovak Foreign Minister, Jan Kubis, and other Slovak representatives in the first half of the coming year will focus on discussion about the nature of the new security elements announced by the American President. We believe that through joint effort with our American as well as European partners we will resolve the issue successfully.

END TEXT.

VALLEE